

Travel

It's a magical mystery island tour...

From scaling Sri Lanka's famous Lion's Rock to having a cuppa at the famous Pedro Tea plantation and spotting wild elephants on a national park safari ride, this is one trip **MARTIN HESP** will never forget

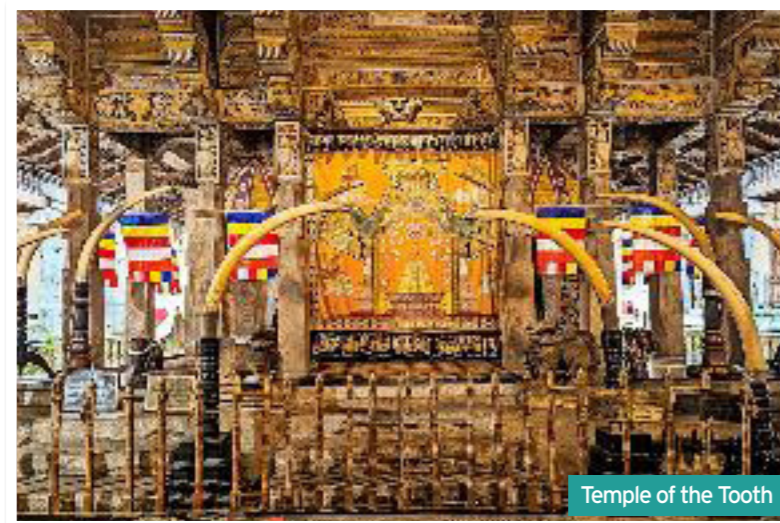
LUXURIOUS hotel on the fabulous coast. If that sounds a bit touristy in a place which has in recent times suffered a terrible civil war, a terrifying tsunami and an economic collapse, then all I can say is that it wasn't – and that is because you have a guide who will take you to places most tourists never see and generally introduce you to some of the complex realities of this extraordinary country.

For example, when we were in Kandy not only did we visit the famous lakeside gold-roofed Temple of the Tooth (which houses a tooth of Lord Buddha – Sri Lanka's most sacred relic) we also went to the outskirts of town to visit a roadside eating establishment called Hela Bojun (meaning Sri Lankan cuisines). This is a kind of social welfare project for economically challenged women. Working in a modern kitchen so clean you could eat off the floor, the ladies cook in pairs, preparing their own local specialities. The place is enormously popular with local people from all walks of life, which is not exactly surprising given that you can purchase a delicious lunch for less than 50p.

It's all part of a structured Hayes & Jarvis programme – you get a dedicated Sri Lankan guide who takes you around this remarkable country acting as an advisor, aide-de-camp, interpreter, educator and all-round fixer. Our wonderfully pleasant and affable Chaminda was an absolute master of all he surveyed – no problem was too great and no question too small. Being a slightly larger group (six in all) we also had our own dedicated minibus driver, who was also a master of all he surveyed – by which I mean the hectic island roads, which are not to everyone's taste.

The pair met us at Colombo Airport after the long but comfortable overnight flight from London aboard Sri Lankan Airlines. And we were off. Within an hour we had stopped at a busy market in a bustling town somewhere en-route to the luxurious Aliya Resort & Spa located near the town of Sigiriya and all its famous sights. In some developing countries, one might find oneself feeling a little overwhelmed walking around a market filled with frenzied buying and selling, but the Sri Lankans are remarkably friendly and a great many of them speak English.

I asked Chaminda if it was OK to



Temple of the Tooth

take photographs, and he looked at me as though I were daft. I have been in Caribbean countries where I've been chased for the mere act of raising a camera – in Sri Lanka everyone waves and smiles and seems to think it's all part of life's amusing tapestry. So I spent a happy half hour photographing the many weird and wonderful fruits and vegetables I'd never seen before.

We stayed two nights at the extremely pleasant Aliya Resort & Spa and duly climbed the Lion's Rock, which plays host to the fifth-century



View of the famous Lion's Rock

citadel of King Kasyapa. This World Heritage Site is one of the country's must-see monuments – the gigantic volcanic plug and its rock fortress overlook a great expanse of symmetrical royal gardens.

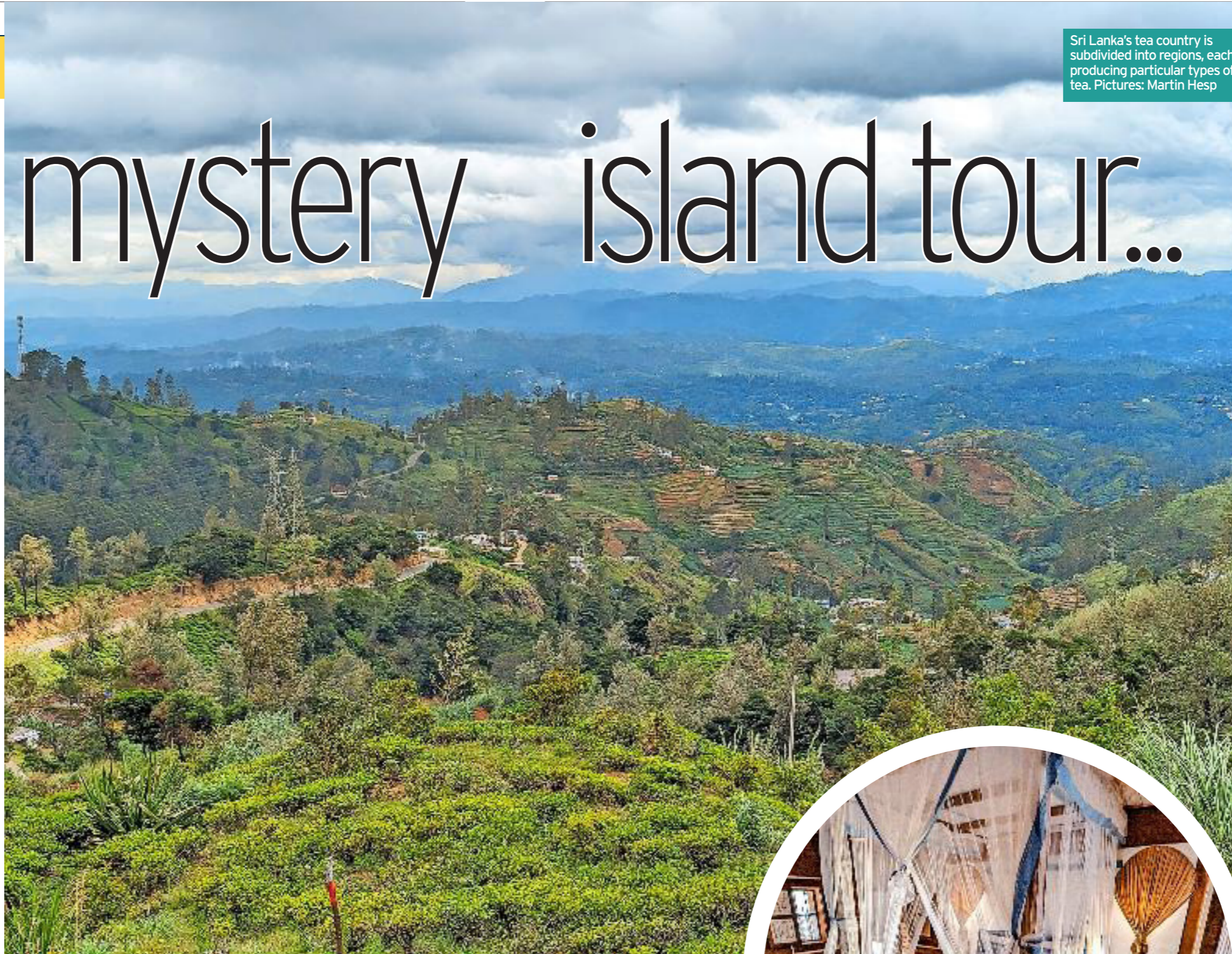
We were also treated to a four-wheel drive safari in the vast 8,000-hectare Minneriya National Park, which is a sanctuary for elephants, herds of deer and birdlife. Indeed, it is said to host the largest regular gatherings of wild elephants in the world – it is not uncommon to see more than 300 giant beasts wandering around the wide open landscapes.

Travelling down to Sri Lanka's old royal capital in the hills, we stayed at the truly fabulous Kandy House – a small boutique hotel located among luxuriant gardens high above the town. The hotel has been converted from the ancestral manor house which was once the private residence of the Kandyan Kingdom's last ever Chief Minister. The comfortable and atmospheric five-star villa has touches of local, Moorish and Dutch styles and is located in the beautiful countryside near the former capital.

Next it was onwards and upwards... This time aboard a train that winds slowly through the mountains and gorges, forests and hills, from Kandy to Nuwara Eliya, high in the tea-growing region. Anyone who has ever enjoyed a classic British cuppa would love this trip – it is truly astonishing to see where our favourite hot drink comes



Wild elephants at Minneriya National Park



Sri Lanka's tea country is subdivided into regions, each producing particular types of tea. Pictures: Martin Hesp



Beruwala Fishery Harbour, Sri Lanka



One of the rooms at the Aliya Resort & Spa

from. Indeed, we visited the famous Pedro Tea plantation and factory so that we could learn all about tea growing and fermentation – a product which so many of us take for granted.

This is high-country. Indeed the weather, as we stayed the night in the comfortable and interesting Blackpool Hotel – set high among the steep tea gardens – made the place look like a Sri Lankan version of Dartmoor. But the thick fog and rain allowed me to realise why it is possible to grow tea perfectly well down in a wet and windy place like Cornwall.

Visit this remarkable area in the

sunshine, though, and you can see why the colonial Brits of

old used to like to build their holiday homes up in the hills. The dramatic highlands of Sri Lanka are as scenic as any uplands anywhere in the world.

And then it was onwards, and downwards... Down, down, down to the great forested south western lowlands of the island – and on to the coast which was hit so badly by the 2004 tsunami. Not that there's much trace of the awful and deadly destruction today, nearly 20 years after the event, in a seaside town like Bentota. Although drive down the coastal highway to some of the more rural areas of the shoreline and you

will still see rusting hulks and ruins. Bustling Bentota is located on sweeping estuary which bends hither and thither before it reaches the sea, creating a wide lagoon that runs parallel with the shoreline for a mile or so.

On the corner of the river where it makes its mind not to breach the final sandbank, but to head north, you will find one of the most magnificent seaside hotels on this vast island.

The Cinnamon Bentota Beach, designed to resemble a Dutch fort and set between Ventura Beach and the Bentara Ganga River, was first designed by one of Asia's most influential architects, Geoffrey Manning Bawa. Situated on the strip that is fondly known as Sri Lanka's 'Gold Coast', the luxury resort plays host to the best water-sports facility in the area and is in close proximity to a variety of attractions, historical landmarks and cultural sites.

As a 'collector' of fish markets wherever I go, I could not resist the Sam call to visit the nearby Beruwala Fishery Harbour. An early morning walk around the market in the dawn light is a fascinating and colourful experience. You are free to wander around – trying not to get in the way of the ever-busy porters who rush around trying to get the fish sold and on its way before the heat of the day takes over. It is a scene of apparent mayhem, but there is a great deal of rapid logic being applied to the buying and selling. Just watch out – it is all too easy to get sprayed with blood and fish guts as filleters and fish butchers work in an extremely

NEED TO KNOW

■ Tailor-made travel and long-haul specialists Hayes & Jarvis offer a range of bespoke tours to Sri Lanka starting from around £1,999 per person for eight nights (excl. international flights). For further details go to www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk or call their team of travel experts on 020 8106 2403.

■ For further details on Sri Lanka with Hayes & Jarvis, as well as various example itineraries, visit: www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk/holidays/sri-lanka

■ Martin used the Purple Parking services while flying out of Heathrow – www.purpleparking.com

■ Martin flew to Sri Lanka with Sri Lankan Airlines – check out their website at www.srilankan.com

rapid and frenzied manner to get their wares sorted and sold before that hot tropical sun climbs into the sky.

It was wonderful – mesmerising – I have never been to a fish market like it.

But then, I have rarely been as mesmerised – or as delighted and fully and utterly absorbed – as I was travelling around this magical land. Hayes & Jarvis took me on a magical mystery tour, and it is one I shall never forget.

Travel



Above, The Cinnamon Bentota Beach. Below left, Kandy House and right, enjoying lunch at Hela Bojun, Kandy

